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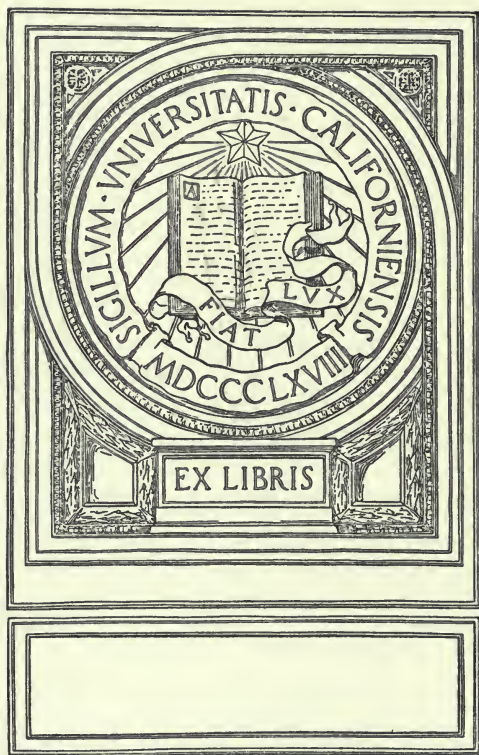
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AN ACCOUNT
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Shakespeare's Plays.

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AN ACCOUNT,

&c. &c.

MR. COLLIER, in a recently published work, has justly observed that although “dramatic pieces in manuscript by Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger, Middleton, and others, are in existence, it is a remarkable fact that not a single written fragment of any of the plays of Shakespeare has come down to us, with the exception of a few passages in some unprinted poetical miscellanies.” In Shakespeare’s own handwriting, it is well known that nothing has been discovered, save his autograph; but Mr. Collier refers to early copies which may be supposed to contain either authorised variations from the commonly received text, or at least conjectural emendations rendered valuable by the time at which they were made. It is reason-

able to suppose that persons contemporary, or nearly so, with our great poet, were more likely to alter advisedly than modern editors, because they probably had a better knowledge of his language and allusions, if they were not so competent to judge of his excellencies.

If we had letters of Shakespeare, his mere autograph would not have sold for a hundred guineas; and had there been autograph copies of his plays extant, the public would probably never have been asked to peruse the following pages. But in the previous absence of every evidence of the kind, it is a satisfaction to me to be the first to place before the reader's notice a brief account of the only known manuscript copy of any of Shakespeare's plays,—not a mere transcript, which would be comparatively worthless, but containing constant variations from every known printed edition.

This curious relic is a manuscript of the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, one of Shakespeare's best comedies, not contemporary with the author, but written during the time of the Commonwealth, in all probability for some private playhouse.

It is entitled “ The Merry Wives of Old Windsor, written by William Shakespeare,” and has the following list of *Dramatis Personæ*, not given in any edition, and was therefore probably the earliest ever made :

ROBERT SHALLOW, Esq., *A Gloc^rshire Justice, vncle to Master Slender.*

SIR HUGH EVANS, *a Welch Priest : Curate and Schoole-master at Windsor.*

MR. GEORGE PAGE, *a rich country Gentleman, in or neer Windsor.*

MRS. MEG PAGE, *his wife.*

MRS. ANNE PAGE, *their daughter.*

BILLY, *their son, Schollar to Master Evans.*

MR. FRANCIS FORD, *a rich jealous curmudgeon of Windsor.*

MRS. ALICE FORD, *his wife.*

MR. ABRA: SLENDER, *nephew to Justice Shallow.*

DOCTOR CAIUS, *a French Phisitian.*

MR. FENTON, *an expensive Courtier.*

<p>Mr. ABRA: SLENDER, nephew to Justice Shallow. Doctor CAIUS, a French Phisitian. Mr. FENTON, an expensive Courtier.</p>	<p>Sutors to Mrs. ANNE PAGE, each favord by</p>	FATHER.
		MOTHER.
		Mrs. ANNE.

SIR JOHN FALSTAFFE, *a fat old decayed leacherous Court Officer.*

BARDOLFE,

NYM,

PISTOLL.

} *His late vnder-officers, now hangers on.*

ROBIN, *his page.*

Mrs. QUICKLY, *Doctor Caius his house keeper, but confident to the women.*

HOST of the Garter, *a merry, conceited, ranting Innholder.*

JOHN RUGBY, *Dr. Caius's man.*

PETER SIMPLE, *Man to Master Slender.*

Servants to Mrs. Ford.

Fairies.

It may be observed of this list, that it exhibits very precise and particular knowledge not only of this play, but of others; and clearly shows that its compiler, whoever he was, considered the *Merry Wives of Windsor* subsequent to the two parts of Henry IV., and that Falstaff was at Windsor in his declining years, as I have elsewhere contended. This, however, is not the place to enter into any discussion of the kind. I shall merely, therefore, take a few extracts from Malone's edition of the *Merry Wives*, and compare them with the manuscript, where it differs from all the early editions, so that each reader will be enabled to judge for himself as to the value of the variations, and consequently of the critical worth of the manuscript, independently of its curiosity.

It is not my intention to attempt a notice of all, or nearly all the variations in the manuscript ; for in order to do so, it would be necessary to reprint the greater part of the play. I merely offer the following as a specimen of the variations with which the manuscript abounds.*

ACT I.—SC. 1.

“ *Shal.* The luce is the fresh fish ; the *salt fish* is an old coat.

Slen. I may quarter, coz.

Shal. You may, by marrying.

Eva. It is marring, indeed, if he quarter it.”

The manuscript reads “ the *salt-water fish* is an old coat,” which may serve to confine the conjectures of the commentators on this very difficult passage within narrower bounds. At all events, this reading appears to overthrow the conjecture of “ A Lover of Heraldry,” given in Knight’s Library Shakespeare, vol. iii. p. 41.

* It ought to be mentioned that the MS. is in the author’s possession, having been purchased by him in March, 1842, of Mr. Proctor, who, I believe, had obtained it from Mr. Rodd. It was but recently that the fact of its being an independent text was discovered. Hence its value.

In Slender's speech, the manuscript reads *uncle* instead of *coz*, an obviously correct emendation, and also made in several other places in the manuscript. A little further onwards the manuscript reads "1700 *li*," instead of "seven hundred pounds," in three places.

ACT I.—Sc. 1.

"*Fal.* I will answer it straight;—I have done all this :—
That is now answered.

Shal. The council shall know this.

Fal. 'Twere better for you if it were known in counsel;
you'll be laughed at."

The manuscript reads "if it were *not* known in council," which appears to be a better reading, and more congenial to sense.

ACT I.—Sc. 1.

"*Nym.* Slice, I say! *pauca, pauca*: slice! *that's* my
humour.

Slen. Where's Simple, my man?—*can you tell, cousin?*"

In Nym's speech, the manuscript reads "*that is* my humour," and the next, "*He can tell you, uncle*," which is certainly preferable to the commonly received reading.

ACT I.—SC. 4.

“ *Fent.* Well, I shall see her to-day ; Hold, there’s money for thee ; let me have thy voice in my behalf : if thou seest her before me, commend me.

Quick. Will I ? i’faith, that *we* will ; and I will tell your worship more of the wart, the next time we have confidence ; and of the wooers.”

The manuscript reads “ that I will,” and thus corrects a very evident error that has passed through all the editions. In a few lines, previously, the manuscript reads, “ it is not *a* good you tarry here,” instead of “ it is not good you tarry here.”

ACT II.—SC. 1.

“ *Mrs. Page.* Letter for letter ; but that the name of Page and Ford differs !—To thy great comfort in this mystery of ill opinions, here’s the twin-brother of thy letter : but let thine inherit first ; for, I protest, mine never shall. I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names, (*sure more,*) and these are of the second edition.”

The second folio reads “ *sue more,*” but the manuscript has “ *shuh ! more,*” which is much more likely to be right. And here I pause a moment to make one observation on Mr. Knight’s note on

the common word *precisian*, occurring just before, and ask why Johnson's definition is not sufficient for its explanation. If any doubt be entertained on this point, let the reader compare the fifth jest in "Jests to Make you Merrie," 4to. Lond. 1607, which unfortunately is not of a character to be quoted.

ACT II.—SC. 1.

"*Mrs. Ford.* Trust me, I thought on her : she'll fit it.

Mrs. Page. You are come to see my daughter Anne?"

The manuscript inserts the words, "Now, Mistress Quickly," at the commencement of the second speech; which appears to be an evident improvement.

ACT II.—SC. 2.

"*Fal.* Not a penny. I have been content, sir, you should lay my countenance to pawn : I have grated upon my good friends for three reprieves for you and your coach-fellow, Nym; or else you had looked through the grate, like a geminy of baboons. I am damned in hell for swearing to gentlemen my friends *you were good soldiers and tall fellows*; and when mistress Bridget lost the handle of her fan, I took't upon mine honour thou hadst it not."

The manuscript reads "*that* you were good

soldiers and *stout* fellows," and other variations in the same speech, such as "*my*" for "*mine*," &c. In the next line, the manuscript reads, "*Didst thou not share.*"

ACT II.—SC. 2.

"*Fal.* * * * I myself sometimes, leaving the fear of heaven on the left hand, and hiding mine honour in my necessity, am fain to shuffle, to hedge, and to lurch ; and yet you, rogue, will ensconce your rags, your cat-a-mountain looks, your red-lattice phrases, and your *bold-beating* oaths, under the shelter of your honour !"

The manuscript reads "*blunderbust* oaths," which is a very curious variation, and well worthy of notice. In the same speech, the manuscript reads "*term*," instead of "*terms*," agreeing in this with the second folio.

ACT II.—SC. 2.

"*Pist.* This punk is one of Cupid's carriers :—

Clap on more sails ; pursue, up with your *fights* ;

Give fire ; she is my prize, or ocean overwhelm them all."

The manuscript reads, "up with your *flags*," which seems much more intelligible. If Mr. Knight had referred to Cole, he would not have given so imperfect a definition of *fights*, which the latter author defines to be, "coverts, any

places where men may stand unseen and use their arms in a ship." See his *English Dictionary*, 8vo. Lond. 1676.

ACT II.—SC. 2.

"*Ford*. Troth, and I have a bag of money here troubles me : if you will help to bear it, Sir John, take all, or half, for easing me of the carriage."

The manuscript reads, "if you will help *me* to bear it."

ACT II.—SC. 2.

"*Ford*. There is a gentlewoman in this town, her husband's name is Ford.

Fal. Well, sir.

Ford. I have long loved her, and I protest to you, bestowed much on her."

The conduct of this is ^{*}entirely changed in the manuscript, which reads as follows :—

"*Ford*. There is a gentleman in this town, his name is Ford, whose wife I have long loved.

Fal. Well, sir.

Ford. And, I protest to you, bestowed much on her."

ACT. II.—SC. 2.

"*Fal*. I will use her as the key *of* the cuckoldy rogue's coffer ; and there's my harvest-home."

The manuscript reads, “ the key *to* the cuckoldy rogue’s coffer.”

ACT II.—SC. 2.

“ Fie, fie, fie! cuckold! *cuckold!* cuckold!”

These are the last words of this scene, and the manuscript reads “ wittol,” instead of the second “ cuckold,” and I have little doubt the manuscript is right; for it agrees with the same exclamation in the former part of the speech.

ACT II.—SC. 3.

“ *Host.* And moreover, bully. — But first, master guest, and master Page, and eke Cavalero Slender, go through the town to Frogmore.”

The manuscript here inserts a very necessary word, in reading “ Master *Justice* Guest,” which is peculiar to this copy.

ACT III.—SC. 1.

“ *Eva.* Bless my soul! how full of cholers I am, and treampling of mind!—I shall be glad if he have deceived me: —how melancholies I am.”

It may be remarked of this manuscript that all Evans’s speeches are very carefully spelt to indicate his peculiar phraseology, much more so than

the printed editions ; and this is one evidence that it was a playhouse copy. Thus, in the present speech, the manuscript reads,—“ Plesse my soul : how full of chollers I am, and tremping of mind : I shall pe glat if he hafe deceivet me : how melanchollies I am ? I will knog his vrinalls apout his knaves costart, when I hafe goot opportunities for the 'orke : Plesse my soul : (*sings*)

“ To shallow rifers to whose falls :
 Melotious birts sing matricalls :
 There will we make our peds of roses,
 And a thousand fragrant posies.”

Surely there is more humour in this than in the printed editions, where the spelling is not uniform. In the first folio, it is “ *sings* madrigalls,” which reading is not, however, adopted by Mr. Knight.

ACT III.—SC. 1.

“ *Page*. I warrant you, he's the man should fight with him.”

The manuscript reads, “ the man *that* should fight with him.”

ACT III.—SC. 1.

“ *Host*. Peace, I say, Gallia and *Gaul* ; French and Welsh ; soul-curer and body-curer.”

The manuscript reads “*Gallia and Wallia*,” which seems to confirm Hanmer’s very sensible emendation.

ACT III.—SC. 2.

“*Ford.* A man may hear this shower sing in the wind!—and Falstaff’s boy with her!—Good plots!—*they are* laid; and our revolted wives share damnation together.”

The manuscript reads “*and well* laid,” which appears to be a most sensible emendation.

ACT III.—SC. 2.

“*Page.* Not by my consent I promise you. The gentleman is of no having; he kept company with the wild Prince and Poins; he is of too high a region, he knows too much. No, he shall not knit a knot in his fortunes with the finger of my substance.”

After the word “*fortunes*,” the manuscript adds “*with my money*.”

ACT III.—SC. 3.

“*Fal.* I see what thou wert, if Fortune thy foe were not, *Nature* thy friend: Come, thou canst not hide it.”

This passage has puzzled the commentators, and Mr. Knight is not of opinion that a perfect sense can be made of the passage as it stands.

The reading of the manuscript renders the matter quite clear, and partially confirms Pope's conjecture. It is, "*Nature's* thy friend." This single emendation is sufficient to stamp a value on the manuscript. Throughout this scene are a variety of alterations. At p. 79, the manuscript reads, "I *am* come before to tell you," which is an improvement. The printed editions omit the word "am." The manuscript also reads, "*Why*, your husband's *a* coming hither, woman," the two words in italics being omitted in the printed copies. It would be impossible to notice all variations of this kind, without reprinting the play. These instances are merely given as examples taken at random to show that the manuscript is an independent text.

ACT III.—SC. 3.

"*Mrs. Page.* What a taking was he in, when your husband asked *who* was in the basket.

"*Mrs. Ford.* I am half afraid he will have need of washing ; so throwing him into the water will do him a *benefit*."

The manuscript here affords a most important emendation, reading "*what* was in the basket." It is very clear that Ford could not have asked

who was in the basket, because had it entered his head that any one was there, he would of course have discovered the trick. That the manuscript is correct is clear from a subsequent passage, where Falstaff tells Master Broome, that the jealous knave “asked them once or twice *what* they had in their basket.” The manuscript also reads “a good turn,” instead of “a benefit.”

ACT III.—Sc. 4.

“*Slen.* No, she shall not dismay me, I care not for that,
—*but that I am afeard.*”

The manuscript reads, “but—I am affeard, la!” It also adds the words, “and family frailties,” after “faults,” in Anne’s next speech; and instead of “a hundred and fifty pounds jointure,” we have “a hundred and fifty pounds *a year* jointure.”

ACT III.—Sc. 4.

“My daughter will I question how she loves you,
And as I find her, so am I affected;
Till then, farewell, sir :—she must needs go in;
Her father will be angry.”

This speech leaves off abruptly, and I have

little doubt that we should read, with the manuscript.—

“ Her father will be angry *else*.”

It may be mentioned that Mrs. Quickly’s speech in the manuscript is entirely different from that in the printed editions, but this, with others, must be reserved for a future opportunity.

ACT IV.—SC. 2.

“ *Ford*. Ay, but if it prove true, master Page, have you any way then to unfool me again.—Set down the basket, villain:—Somebody call my wife:—Youth in a basket!—O, you panderly rascals! there’s a knot, a *ging*, a pack, a conspiracy against me.”

The first folio reads *gin*, but the manuscript has *gang*, which is clearly the right word. A little further on, the manuscript reads, “ Here’s no man *here*,” which last word is omitted in the printed editions, although necessary.

ACT IV.—SC. 5.

“ *Host*. Here’s a Bohemian-Tartar carries the coming down of *thy* fat woman. Let her descend, bully, let her descend; my chambers are honourable: Fie! privacy? fie!”

The manuscript reads “ of *that* fat woman”

which is more likely to be correct than the commonly received reading.

ACT V.—SC. 2.

“ *Page.* The night is dark ; light and spirits will become it well. Heaven prosper our sport ! No man means evil but the devil, and we shall know him by his horns. *Let’s away ; follow me.*”

The manuscript reads, “ Let’s away ; come, son Slender, follow me.”

With this specimen I conclude, and leave to others the question how far these emendations may be safely admitted into an edition of Shakespeare. The question, perhaps, is one rather of authority than judgment ; and it may certainly be a doubt whether the manuscript is of a higher authority, as far as regards the text, than the corrections of the first folio which Mr. Collier discovered in a copy belonging to Lord Francis Egerton. But early corrections, like the corrections in the folio of 1632, must be of more authority than those made by Rowe, Pope, and subsequent editors ; and an early manuscript copy of any one

of Shakespeare's plays, even though written after the poet's death, cannot but be considered a great curiosity. It would be impossible to say whether the manuscript now under consideration was taken from a contemporary copy or not. It is, however, certain that no transcript of an early edition, though carefully corrected, could possibly contain the numerous and extensive variations which are found in this manuscript of the "Merry Wives of Windsor."

And it is this last consideration which inclines me to think that it must have been copied for some private exhibition, so common, according to Kirkman, during the Commonwealth. If so, the corrections made in it were probably by some one who had seen this play acted, and had remembered the players' versions of those passages he has altered. And this, upon the whole, appears to be the most probable mode of accounting for the peculiar readings with which it abounds.

Mr. Collier attaches considerable value to a few extracts from Shakespeare's plays which he found in an early manuscript common-place book,

although he confesses that it is doubtful whether the writer employed printed copies, resorted to manuscript authorities, or only recorded striking passages which he heard at the theatres. Even with this doubt, so honestly expressed, Mr. Collier tells us that "these brief extracts, never exceeding five lines, now and then throw light upon difficult and doubtful expressions." I quote this, not in the expectation of claiming for the manuscript any additional value, but for the purpose of showing how very little early written authority for the text of Shakespeare has yet been discovered, and the extreme importance given by the critics to evidence of this nature. Some of us, perhaps, are sufficiently sanguine to believe that one day or other will bring to light a copy of "Love's Labours Won," or a bundle of the original prompt copies of Shakespeare's plays, as they were exhibited within his "wooden O;" but those who do not anticipate such wonders, whose "ultima Thule" of expectation is the sight of the first edition of "Titus Andronicus," and who recollect how com-

paratively few and unimportant the recent discoveries have been, will be more inclined to receive the present addition to Shakespearian criticism in a favourable light.

THE END.

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